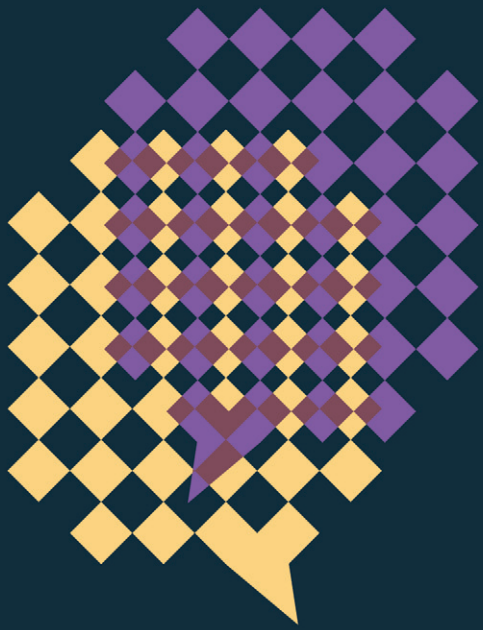

REFUGEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2ND EDITION

Debate, Discourse and Practice

Jacqueline Stevenson
and Sally Baker

GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

REFUGEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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REFUGEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Debate, Discourse and Practice (2nd edition)

BY

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Professor Jacqueline Stevenson is a Honorary Professor in the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter and a part-time academic at a number of UK universities including the Open University and Leeds Beckett University. She is a sociologist of education with a particular interest in policy and practice relating to equity and diversity, access and student success and pedagogic diversity. Key areas of interest are the social and academic experiences of religious students, and policy and practice relating to the access of refugees and asylum seekers to higher education. She draws on the theoretical lenses of resilience, belonging, mattering, time, temporality and future selves. Her research is primarily qualitative, using biography, narrative inquiry and life history. Jacqueline is the Vice-chair of the Governing Council of the Society for Research into Higher Education, and was previously Professor of Higher Education at Leeds Beckett University, Professor of Educational Research at Sheffield Hallam University and Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Leeds.

Dr Sally Baker is an Associate Professor in Migration and Education at the Australian National University. Sally is a critical sociologist of higher education, whose teaching and research interests centre on care, academic language and

literacies, transitions and equity in higher education, particularly with people with lived experience of forced migration. Her research is principally qualitative, using longitudinal ethnographic approaches to following how changes unfold over time. Sally is the founder and a co-chair of the Refugee Education Special Interest Group, which is a national, cross-sectoral network who advocate for better educational opportunities and outcomes for people with forced migration experiences.

Dr William Mude is a public health professional, academic and advocate for refugee education. Born in South Sudan (then part of Sudan), William's childhood was marked by hardship and displacement due to the civil war, and he spent much of his early life in refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya. William is now a Senior Lecturer in Public Health at the University of Canberra, where he teaches epidemiology and communicable diseases to undergraduate and postgraduate students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We dedicate this book to the many refugee students who we have worked with over the years, and who have invariably influenced our practice, research and advocacy. We have seen what meaningful access to higher education (with support and care) can do to elevate a person's sense of what is possible, and how they can rebuild some of the resources and opportunities lost through forced displacement. We have often heard our students express enormous gratitude for the opportunity to study, despite the impediments that universities inadvertently impose through inflexible, unresponsive and punitive structures, systems and practices. We recognise that these students seldom get to speak about their educational experiences into powerful spaces like this book, and when rare opportunities to share the higher education experiences of refugee students are opened, these often trumpet the resilient *individual*, thus ignoring the *many* refugee students engaged in higher education. This book is a testament to all those students.

We would also like to thank Aaliyah, Andy, Sadiya and William whose stories appear in this book. In addition, we express our immense gratitude to our very patient families and offer heart-warm thanks to Anna Xavier, Carla Bassil, Michelle Manks and many others for their intellectual

support with the writing of this book, as well as those other scholars and practitioners working to open up higher education spaces to refugees in the United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere.

1

INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, we discuss the realities, histories and geographies of forced migration, as well as the importance of higher education for people with forced migration experience. This discussion sets the ground for this second edition of our book. The first part of the chapter offers a rationale for updating this book. The second part of the chapter (re)positions the book against the contemporary global migration context, and foregrounds the importance of, and right to, education for people from refugee backgrounds. It also considers how global missions, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030), and more recent additions, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) '15/30' campaign (UNHCR, 2023a), have created new possibilities for transforming educational opportunities for refugees. We also outline the humanitarian programmes and practices of the UK and Australia, including discussion of how these variations impact on the capacity to access and participate in higher education in each country. In the third part of this chapter, we outline how participation in HE (or non-participation) can have a significant impact on the

employment prospects of refugees and asylum seekers (when the latter are permitted to work). The chapter ends with brief synopses of the succeeding chapters.

WHY THIS BOOK AND WHY UPDATE IT?

We have worked in spaces of refugee education for many years, and engaged in collective forms of advocacy, pushing for better institutional understandings of the needs of students who do not share the dominant language and cultural background of the academy. During this time, we have seen a growth in scholars writing in the academic literature about refugee education. However, we have not yet seen universities introduce the kinds of practices and supports argued for in this same literature to respond to the bespoke needs of refugee students. Where there have been institutional initiatives, these have invariably focused on the access of single refugees to HE, rather than making multiple offers, or enabling sustained changes to be made to institutional policy and practice. There is also an absence of support available to those refugees who have been able to make the successful transition in to HE as they are classed as 'home' students, despite sharing many of the needs of their international student peers. Instead, there are blockages at every level (international, national, regional and institutional) about making the kinds of cultural and structural changes that are needed to make HE a viable and attractive option for the many, rather than a struggle for the few.

This book is, therefore, timely. It scopes out what is known, and what has been previously discussed about students from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds and HE.

It also offers empirical accounts of the kinds of challenges that students can face – drawing on data collected from our research projects (see Chapters 5–7) – illustrating our claims about how pervasive discourses, debates and practices can work to both support and deny refugee students' engagement in HE. Finally, it asks questions of how universities contribute to and resist dominant discourses relating to asylum, refuge, refugees and forced migration, and offers our thinking around the role HE *can* and *should* play in increasing the visibility of refugee students in the system, opening access to people from asylum seeking backgrounds, and developing spaces for voice and ownership in both pedagogic and research interactions for, and with, refugees.

Before moving on, we offer an update on where we find ourselves, what has changed and what we are bringing to this second edition.

Personal Account: Jacqueline

I am a sociologist of education with over 30 years' experience of working in the education sector, including in primary schools, in further education and higher education and in community development, both in the UK and internationally. Throughout this time, I have worked with both children and adults who have sought asylum in the UK. This has included teaching 'English', teaching employability classes and running higher education access programmes for refugees. I also set up a refugee mentoring scheme at Sheffield Hallam University designed to link professionally qualified refugees to academics who can help them navigate both the UK higher education system and understand how to access employment.

Across all my work I have been repeatedly struck by the ways in which educational policy and practice works, to

'other' those who have insecure migration statuses. For this reason, much of the focus of my research has been rooted in a critical analysis of the origins, structures and consequences of educational inequalities, and in the sorts of policies and practices which might affect change.

As the UK has tightened up its borders and strengthened its hostile environment policy, it has been heartening to see the number of universities offering scholarships to refugees expand significantly, whilst organisations such as Student Action for Refugees, Universities of Sanctuary and Refugee Education UK continue to lobby hard to facilitate access to HE.[1–3] Moreover, mainstream bodies such as the Office for Students (the independent regulator of higher education in England) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, the UK's shared admissions service for HE) now include consideration of refugees and asylum seekers in their more mainstream policymaking. Despite this, there is still much work to be done, with refugees continuing to face many of the challenges in seeking to access HE in the UK that were described in the first edition of this book.

In re-visiting our book, we aim to evidence the progress that has been made, whilst also highlighting the on-going barriers that many forced migrants still face in seeking to access HE, at a time of on-going border tensions, new and continuing conflicts and the never ending forced displacement of peoples across the world.

1 https://star-network.org.uk/
2 https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/
3 https://www.reuk.org/

Personal Account: Sally

In the 5 years that have passed since the first edition of this book was published, not only have scholarly contributions to the 'field' of refugee education massively increased but also advocacy at intranational, national, sectoral and institutional has also grown in size and impact. Sadly, as we note at the outset of this chapter, so has the need. In the last 5 years, we have seen the mighty twins of chaos – war and climate catastrophe – forcibly displace more people than ever previously recorded. This means that while the percentage of refugees in higher education has grown from 1% when we wrote the first edition to 7% in 2023, this is woefully inadequate given the massive growth in displacement.

However, despite this calamitous context, we have seen real progress. In Australia, these stolen lands from which I write, we gained a new Labor government in 2022 which translated into immediate hope for change. In the short term, while not all goals are set to be achieved by the end of their first term, the federal government has abolished temporary protection, meaning all refugees who applied and apply for asylum 'onshore' will be offered permanent protection when their claim for refuge has been positively assessed. This has meant in the immediate term that over 19,000 refugees who were given Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) (3 year term) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) (5 year term) are now being processed for permanent protection. It also means that many of these people are now able to access higher education as 'domestic students', with the same access to Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) as Australian citizens. This is a huge win for Australia, and for the university sector. Over the past 5 years, we have also witnessed year-on-year uptake of responsibility by universities, evidenced by the numbers of fee-waiver scholarships offered to people seeking

asylum, as well as the developments at the sector level with the development of the 'Welcoming Universities' standard (Welcoming Australia, 2023), and exploration of the establishment of an education migration pathway for refugees.

These are welcome developments and a testament to the hard work of many educators, advocates, researchers and activists who have consistently and passionately petitioned to open and enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for students who have experienced forced displacement, irrespective of their pathway to Australia. I am proud to say I am one of these people, and the Refugee Education Special Interest Group that I co-chair continues to be a driver of change in this space.[4] Overall, these developments – the wins and the new challenges – set against our rapidly changing world warrant a fresh look at the debates, discourses and practices that construct the field and experiences of refugees in higher education.

GLOBAL MIGRATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN TIMES OF SUPER-PRECARITY

Global Patterns of Forced Migration

This book was originally written at what we described as a time of unprecedented displacement. Sadly, since the first edition was published in 2018, the situation for forced migration has got much worse. The UNHCR estimates that in 2023, over 108 million people had been forcibly displaced from their homes because of protracted conflict, persecutions, political instability and human rights violations. Of these peoples, 35.3 million have been given refugee status, with

4 www.refugee-education.org/

millions awaiting assessment, and 4.4 million are currently confirmed as stateless, with the true figure likely to be much more (UNHCR, 2023b). More than half of the world's displaced people in 2023 come from three 'refugee-producing' countries: Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syrian Arab Republic, and over 4 million have lived in exile or in situations of protracted displacement for over 20 years (UNHCR, 2023c).

There are currently ongoing emergencies in Sudan, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Gaza. Sudan has again been in a state of civil war since April 2023, with brutal attacks on civilians, widespread rape and the blocking of humanitarian aid being regularly reported (UNHCR, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f). In 2022, before this most recent emergency, there were already 836,756 Sudanese refugees under UNHCR mandate, and over 3.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs), double the number from 2017 (UNHCR, 2023f). Instability and human suffering are ongoing in Afghanistan, where, after decades of intermittent war, the Taliban seized government in August 2021. Women and girls are being denied their basic human rights to education and freedom of movement, and in 2023, there are over 8.2 million forcibly displaced Afghanis spread over 103 countries. Over 70% of those are women and children (UNHCR, 2023d). In Ukraine war has been ongoing since the Russian invasion of February 2022, with civilian infrastructure undergoing widespread destruction. In 2023 there are 7.1 million Ukrainian refugees spread across Europe, 90% of whom are women and children.

Despite these and other refugee emergencies, globally less than 60,000 people were resettled by some of the 37 countries who are signatories to the Refugee Convention, which compares unfavourably with the 2.6 million new asylum claims that were processed in the same year (UNHCR, 2023c). The situation for many asylum seekers is desperate; to date, nearly 24,000 people have drowned trying to make 'dangerous

irregular journeys' to reach Europe by sea (UNHCR, 2019, p. 7), and despite the work of humanitarian agencies, many are living in situations of extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2023c) in overcrowded camps, largely on the borders of, or, in countries least able to deal with their needs.

Global Education Enrolment Rates for Refugees

The impacts of the unprecedented number of people on the move have been felt across the world, most keenly by the countries who share borders with countries suffering extreme conflict, such as Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Uganda and Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2023c). That these neighbouring countries are mostly 'low or middle-income' countries (UNHCR, 2023c) are not insignificant, and contributes to the endemic barriers to accessing education, as well as other forms of support and access to services. The UNHCR estimates that the educational engagement of refugees living in protracted displacement is significantly lower than global averages. For instance, although significant improvements in global education figures show that close to 100% of children of primary school age are engaged in schooling, almost two-thirds (65%) of refugee children of primary school age are in school (UNHCR, 2023b). As children get older, the situation worsens: only 41% of secondary school age refugee youth are engaged in schooling, compared with 84% globally, and this number is even lowering low-income countries (UNHCR, 2023b). The UNHCR estimate that only 7% of refugees now have access to tertiary education, compared with a global participation rate of 38% of people in middle income countries, 58% in upper-middle income countries and 79% in high income countries (UNHCR, 2023b). Without access to education, refugees are denied opportunities to develop the